

BOUQUET OF FLOWERS IN A VASE: VAN GOGH'S “UNEXPECTED” PAINTING

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The Metropolitan Museum of Art describes Van Gogh's *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* (fig. 1) as a painting that has been a mystery for many scholars as to its place in Van Gogh's oeuvre. The wall label states, “it is the closest to the mixed bouquets of summer flowers that he produced in ‘quantity’ in Paris;” but at the same time, the label raises a contradiction by stating that this still-life has the ‘quality’ of the paintings Van Gogh produced in Saint-Remy and Auvers.¹ Two different periods in Van Gogh's life are seen in one painting. *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* is given little attention in primary sources and is different from his many other still-life paintings because the techniques employed in this painting are more commonly seen in Van Gogh's landscapes. As a result, the date of this work has been subject to con-

troversy. This thesis will situate the date of this painting securely in Van Gogh's oeuvre by using methods such as intensive formal analysis, biography, and natural science investigation.

Van Gogh loved to paint flowers. He wrote to his brother, Theo, “I for myself am contented, for better or for worse, to be a small gardener who loves his plants.”² Flowers were easily accessible to Van Gogh, even when he could not afford models or was unable to paint outside. Specific flowers, such as sunflowers, roses, and lilies, frequently occur in his work and are intimately associated with his oeuvre. Flowers were also an ever-changing subject matter, since he would paint what was blooming in the season.³ Flower painting provided the artist with mastery in skills of observation; this later helped in other works such as figure, landscape and portrait painting.⁴

Van Gogh was aware that there is a special art to painting flowers because they have subtle changes in hue and shade, which is of much significance for the overall painting. Van Gogh wanted to “harmonize brutal extremes,” and he found painting flowers as a venue for doing many studies and achieving new ways to use intense color in his paintings.⁵

Throughout Van Gogh's life, he went from being influenced by other movements to eventually finding his own artistic style. This became one of the reasons why he was not accepted along with the Impressionist masters; Van Gogh felt he needed to achieve greatness with his own artistic style.⁶ With

this in mind, however, *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* cannot be placed among the works produced before the Paris period (1886): it relies on a familiarity with Impressionism and 19th century color theory and Van Gogh was not introduced to this until he moved to Paris.

The work is best described in terms of its color: first, there is the dark blue background that fades into the reddish brown table on which rests a bouquet in a vase surrounded at its base by a type of fern. The bouquet is mostly composed of white and yellow flowers. There is no clean yellow paint in the bouquet because it seems that it was painted over when the blue was just drying. The green sections in the bouquet are composed of a variety of greens; even bright, almost fluorescent greens can be seen. On the top of the bouquet, there are a couple of orange flowers and two buds of the same orange flowers on the opposite side. In the lower portion of the bouquet, three other flowers are arranged, one red and the two others pink.

The viewer is positioned just a little above the flowers, as if one were observing the bouquet standing near the table. There is a sense of balance because the brushstrokes of the table seem to cradle the vase that is positioned in the center of the canvas. The space given to the vase fills a majority of the area with a very densely arranged bouquet. The pace with which Van Gogh painted *Bouquet* seems to have been very rapid. This is seen in the aggressive application of paint and the way in which some

flowers look as if paint was applied before the background dried.

There is a subtle, but distinctive, use of complementary colors. The purpose of doing so would be to create the feeling that the colors in the painting are brighter than they are by themselves. The orange flowers on the top are a similar hue to the table, and consequently, give the illusion that the blue background is more intense than it is. The red and pink flowers are surrounded by the green fern, which also makes the red brighter. Lastly, Van Gogh used a small amount of light purple in the flowers that are placed around the yellow ones. Through these details, Van Gogh demonstrates his knowledge of the theory of complementary colors.

This is not to say that this work has no connection to earlier works. Even before the period in Paris, Van Gogh was impressed by Dutch and French artists and in particular, by their use of color and how they painted quickly. He believed it was a joy to paint in one burst and that it gave the paintings a spontaneous quality that Van Gogh wanted to achieve. In a letter to Theo, he suggested that everyone look at French and Dutch paintings because of their realism and their highly variegated color palette.⁷ In *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase*, moreover, the position of the vase is at the center of the canvas, a traditional choice that rejects the then-current vogue for Japanese prints and asymmetrical composition. This positioning and densely populated bouquet was often seen in Dutch and French still-life paintings that

were an influence early in Van Gogh's life (fig. 2).⁸

In order to narrow down the date of the work more specifically, we can look profitably to Van Gogh's two final years in Saint-Remy and Auvers. In his final years, Van Gogh achieved what many believe to be the highest painting quality of his career. These periods synthesize every bit of influence that Van Gogh might have acquired throughout his life. One can see clearly in *Bouquet* the many techniques he learned and his mastery of color theory.

The period in Saint-Remy was dominated by Van Gogh's sickness: he opted to commit himself to the asylum there after mutilating himself. Van Gogh committed himself mostly to be isolated from the world, writing to his sister and brother that this would lead to a calmer psychological self. He wanted to be separated from the world because he believed that it might be the only way he could start feeling better. "I am unable to describe exactly what's wrong with me; now and then there are horrible fits of anxiety, apparently without a cause, or otherwise a feeling of emptiness and fatigue in the head."⁹ He also longed to abandon his previous painting style that seemed to reflect his agitated state of mind. Van Gogh later described this period at Saint-Remy as a peaceful one where he was able to continue his works unself-consciously; the seclusion helped him focus on his psychological self rather than his art.¹⁰

After a year in Saint-Remy, Van Gogh's productivity during his time in Auvers (1890) was that of a canvas per day. Van Gogh befriended his psychia-

trist, Dr. Paul Gachet, during this period and it was because of him that he moved to Auvers. For some time, Van Gogh's paintings seemed much calmer and he had lost some characteristics of his style before his commitment directly related to the changes in his life. His paintings started to be dominated by flowers, something that meant security for him.¹¹ Before Saint-Remy, Van Gogh's paintings reflected his tortured psyche.¹² After some time, however, Van Gogh returned to the same style and especially, attempts at achieving grandiosity with color by intensifying its effects. Van Gogh loved the power of color: "In color seeking life the true drawing is modeling with color."¹³ His paintings were quickly executed and much more intense, recapturing the anguish Van Gogh felt before Saint-Remy. He was, in part, re-adjusting from living in isolation for a year and returning in many ways to his old self. Auvers is where Van Gogh spent the rest of his days, from May until his suicide in July.¹⁴

The flowers in the vase of *Bouquet* play a role in determining that this still-life is not from the Auvers period. As mentioned earlier, the Metropolitan Museum describes the flowers as "the closest to the mixed bouquets of summer flowers,"¹⁵ but the flowers have not been definitely identified. The white, orange and yellow flowers in the bouquet have been identified as chrysanthemums. These are fall flowers in the European climate. The scientific name for this type of chrysanthemum is "*hypochaeris radicata*" and it is similar to a dandelion, considered a widespread weed.¹⁶ There are three other flowers in the bouquet that are not chrysanthemums; these are the red and



Fig. 1 Vincent van Gogh, *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase*. Oil on Canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY.
Image: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY



Fig. 2 Eugene Delacroix, 149-1850. *Wildflower Bouquet*. Oil on Canvas. Musée des beaux-arts, France.
Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY



Fig. 3 Vincent van Gogh, *Vase with Asters, Salvia and Other Flowers*, 1886. Oil on Canvas
The Hague, Haags Gemeentemuseum.



Fig. 4 Vincent van Gogh, Wheatfield with Cypresses, 1889. Oil on Canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art. © National Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 5 Vincent van Gogh, Flowering Orchard, 1888. Oil on Canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY
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pink flowers in the bottom of the bouquet. The pink flower is closest to a begonia, which grows in late spring to early fall. The red flower may be a poppy. Van Gogh was not a stranger to them: he used them for many still life paintings and they also grow in the fall. *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* could not have been produced in Auvers because Van Gogh was only there for the first half of the year and committed suicide before the fall season arrived.

It should be stated that after a close look at the *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase*, Dr. Hans den Nijs classified the flowers as asters instead of the common presumption of chrysanthemums.¹⁷ Dr. Hans den Nijs is a professor at the University of Amsterdam, and has dedicated his life to classifying flowers from various still-life paintings by Van Gogh. He deduced that the flowers in *Bouquet* are Chinese asters. Through Louis Van Tilborgh, Senior Researcher at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Dr. Hans den Nijs discussed Chinese asters:

They have around the leaves with color also leaves with green, and in this case he presumed that although the color is not exactly green, but a little bit lighter, he thought also in connection with the other characteristics that in this case they must also be asters (sic).¹⁸

I cannot agree with this identification because in Van Gogh's oeuvre, asters have been depicted very few times and the way that they are painted appear dif-

ferently from the flowers in *Bouquet*. For example, in *Vase with Asters, Salvia and Other Flowers* (1886) (fig. 3), the sizes in which the asters are painted do not match the flowers in *Bouquet*. Also, Van Gogh seems to put more attention in the shift of colors in the center of each aster, while in *Bouquet*, the center of each flower is depicted as a small dot. At the same time, chrysanthemums have been painted before in a greater quantity than asters and they have striking similarities to the flowers painted in *Bouquet*.¹⁹ For example, the chrysanthemums painted in *Bowl with Chrysanthemums* (1886) have similar brushstrokes to the flowers in *Bouquet*. *Bowl with Chrysanthemums* is, however, an earlier work, and therefore, painted with a more realistic technique.

The *Church at Auvers* (1890) is a characteristic example of Van Gogh's style at this time, incorporating many techniques that were common in the Auvers period. The color palette has a similarity to *Bouquet*, employing dark colors and eliminating the use of chrome yellow. There is a variety of brushstrokes used in this painting: the church is painted with thin criss-cross brushstrokes and the grass is painted with precise, but varied brushstrokes; both are highly agitated. In contrast, the brushstroke in *Bouquet*, while varied, is systematic and controlled.

Saint-Remy is also a period that cannot accommodate the particular qualities of *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase*. As stated above, during this period, Van Gogh aimed to separate himself from the state of mind that made him decide to commit him-

self. His paintings reflected his anguish and inability to understand what was wrong with him. *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* shows an obsession with a perfectly systematic, very precise, contained brushstroke that is almost academic in its exploration of different marks. This makes it less likely that it would have been produced during the time when Van Gogh aimed to look more into his psychological self than into precise artistic techniques.

During the Saint-Remy period, Van Gogh produced paintings such as *Wheatfield with Cypresses* (1889) (fig. 4) and *First Steps* (after Millet) (1890). These paintings have significant characteristics of the Saint-Remy period, which are not seen in *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase*. In *Wheatfield with Cypresses*, Van Gogh uses his common chrome yellow and he applies a lot of thick impasto to the canvas. In *Bouquet*, the closest the viewer gets to thick paint is in some of the flowers, but it is not applied in the way it was typically done in other Van Gogh paintings. In fact, the paint is applied so thickly in *Wheatfield* that it cracked after drying, and this is seen in other paintings of the Saint-Remy period. Also, unlike *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* where brushstroke covers every inch of the canvas, in *Wheatfield with Cypresses*, the artist has left pieces of the canvas unpainted. For *First Steps* (after Millet), Van Gogh applied brushstrokes in a very distinctive manner that is circular and swirled. This swirled brushstroke cannot be found in the still life. In *First Steps* (after Millet), the viewer is also able to see parts of the canvas because Van Gogh relies very heavily on outline without

much detail. This is very different from how *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* is depicted.

The period after Paris (1888) and before Saint-Remy (1889) presents itself as a possible time frame in which *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* was painted. While Van Gogh was in Paris, the master Impressionists heavily influenced him. This was reflected in the works he produced while he lived in Paris. However, Van Gogh was unhappy with the way he was painting, and he moved to Arles in southern France. He wanted to do more with color, to capture its intensity and extremes. "Color expresses something in itself, one cannot do without this, one must use it; what is beautiful, really beautiful- is also correct."²⁰

It was in Arles, in particular, that he learned about Japanese art and culture, and it affected him in both his life and painting style. Van Gogh longed to feel connected to Japanese culture: "he was establishing a connection with the art he admired so much and with the exemplary lifestyle of the Orient."²¹ At the same time, he saw it as a challenge: "The Japanese draw quickly, very quickly, like a lightning flash, because their nerves are finer, their feeling simpler."²² Van Gogh wanted that simpler feeling and faster style, and the techniques he used during this period to get them consisted of very precise and systematic brushstrokes. The *Flowering Orchard* (fig. 5) is one of the best examples of these techniques during this period.²³ Van Gogh's instinct for color was at its best: "You see things with an eye more Japanese, you feel color differently."²⁴

In *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase*, the background has the same type of precise and premeditated brushstroke that is seen in the paintings of the Arles period. If we look closer at *The Flowering Orchard*, the main difference between it and *Bouquet* is that in the former, each line in the grass section stands by itself, whereas in *Bouquet*, each line is close to the next. The second stylistic similarity is the way the stems of the flowers are drawn: the lines are very defined and angular, similar to what is seen in the branches of the orchard tree.

Van Gogh's still life painting, *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase*, is an important piece, demonstrating the quality of Van Gogh's later works while presenting unexpected characteristics and color choices. There is little question that it is by Van Gogh: the provenance of *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* is impeccable. One of the first places where *Bouquet* was seen was in Marie Harriman's gallery. Marie Harriman studied art history and married Averell Harriman, a businessman. She turned her modern art interest into a business and was known to have connections with the best modern art dealers. It is likely that *Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase* was purchased in one of the many trips to Paris that Marie Harriman took with her husband.²⁵

Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase can be situated in the fall of the Arles period in Van Gogh's oeuvre. For Van Gogh, most still-life paintings were used as 'studies' in order to achieve mastery of technique or subtleties in color. This still-life painting may even be

considered a study because there is a certain degree of carelessness in the application of color. The paint in each flower is not entirely clean, indicating that Van Gogh was either careless when applying the paint or that he did it in a fast-paced manner in which he did not wait for the painting to dry.

Van Gogh had just arrived in Arles during the fall. He was at the point where he was trying to detach from the strict Impressionist rules learned in Paris and find new styles and techniques. The use of color theory, precise brushstrokes, and some degree of Japanese influence further indicate the Arles context. At this time, Van Gogh's still-life paintings were methods to find new techniques that could be used in other projects. This still-life is placed in the timeframe when he was in between two major periods.

In conclusion, during the fall of 1888, Van Gogh painted a study of a bouquet that demonstrated his mastery of brushstroke, use of complementary colors, and awareness of Japanese culture. At a crossroads in his work, he was also still incorporating influences from Dutch and French still-life painting that he admired when he was younger. As a transition work, Van Gogh ultimately created a curious piece that would raise many questions for its audience.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Metropolitan Museum, "Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase." 2011. http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database/all/bouquet_of_flowers_in_a_vase_vincent_van_gogh/objectview.aspx?page=1&sort=6&sortdir=asc&keyword=bouquet%20of%20flowers%20%20van%20gogh&fp=1&dd1=0&dd2=0&vw=1&colIID=0&OID=110000967&vT=1&hi=0&ov=0. (September 2011).
- 2 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: with Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence -VII* (New York: Little Brown, 1991), 426.
- 3 Judith Bumpus, *Van Gogh's Flowers* (New York: Phaidon Press, 1998), 9.
- 4 Ralph Fabri, *Complete Guide to Flower Painting* (New York: Watson- Guptill Publications, 1968), 14-15.
- 5 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: with Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence -VII*, 513.
- 6 This refers to multiple letters in the period Van Gogh arrived in Paris (March 1886- February 20th, 1888) and learned who the Impressionists were. He longed to be part of their movement, but when he realized that he was not like them, he moved again.
- 7 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: with Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence -VII*, 419.
- 8 Idem., 419-425.
- 9 Idem., 452.
- 10 Ingo F. Walther and Rainer Metzger, *Vincent Van Gogh: the Complete Paintings* (Köln: Taschen, 2001), 505-507.
- 11 Idem., 492-498.
- 12 Idem., 643-647.
- 13 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: with Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence -V.II*, 513.
- 14 Walther and Metzger, *Vincent Van Gogh: the Complete Paintings*, 643-647.
- 15 Metropolitan Museum, "Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase."
- 16 Ian Clark and Helen Lee, *Name that Flower: The Identification of Flowering Plants* (Australia: Melbourne University Press, 1987), 180.
- 17 Susan Stein, Ethan Asher, and Colin B. Bailey, *The Annenberg Collection: Masterpieces of Impressionism and Post-impressionism* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009) 230-234.

- 18 Idem., 230-234 and email correspondence with Dr. Van Tilborgh, who is in contact with Dr. Hans den Nijs.
- 19 Idem., 230-234.
- 20 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: with Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence -VII*, 428.
In a letter to his friend Horace M. Levens (p.513), Van Gogh explains how he seeks to “harmonize brutal extremes. Trying to render intense color and not a grey harmony.”
- 21 Walther and Metzger, *Vincent Van Gogh: the Complete Paintings*, 329.
- 22 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: with Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence -VII*, 590.
- 23 Walther and Metzger, *Vincent Van Gogh: the Complete Paintings*, 329-330.
- 24 Vincent Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: with Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence -VII*, 590.
- 25 Provenance is seen in Metropolitan Museum website, “Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase.” And Marie Harriman is mentioned in an article by Nancy Yeide. “The Marie Harriman Gallery.” *The Smithsonian Institution* 39 (1999): 2-11. The article also mentions that Marie Harriman purchased Van Gogh’s Roses.